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THE COMPARATIVE RÔLE OF THE GROUP CONCEPT IN WARD'S *DYNAMIC SOCIOLOGY* AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

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Small approaches the study of sociology from the methodological side. His writings cover a period of more than a quarter of a century, and in themselves offer an opportunity to show the changes in part which have taken place in sociological thought in that period. His thinking is rare in that it shows a growing tendency and an ability to assimilate the modifying trends and movements in the general field. Since we are not attempting to trace the whole of his system of sociology, we shall not attempt to show those changes which may appear, but shall rely on the later points of view in so far as they bear upon the subject in hand. We may, however, point out an impression which a reading of the various publications has left, and that is, a growing emphasis upon the group concept as a tool of thought and explanation. Not that his thinking was ever individualistic, in the proper sense of the term, but that the group concept has become more sharply defined and has gradually assumed a more central and commanding position in his thinking. As will be pointed out later, Small's use of the organic concept in his earlier writings shows that the facts of group solidarity and social continuity, interdependence and unity, were in his thought from the beginning. But the explicit use of the group concept, as such, and its implications for sociology in particular, are increasingly apparent as one pursues a study of the writing in a chronological order. We shall have some hesitancy, therefore, in placing too much reliance on exact statements in *General Sociology* in so far as this particular problem concerns us. In other words, the effort will be to present Small's present views in regard to the group concept, rather than to trace a historical development of them.¹

¹ Reliance will be placed to some extent upon unpublished lectures as recalled from lecture notes and conversations.

We may approach the study of Small's use of the group concept by first indicating his conception of the nature of sociology and its place among the various social sciences. According to Small, sociology is one of the variant techniques that have been developed in the "drive toward objectivity" in the field of social science. It is a natural outgrowth of the effort to see and understand the social life as it actually is, rather than from any abstract metaphysical or a priori standpoint. He has defined or described the place of sociology in various recent publications. These may be cited as the mature expression of his thinking on the problem. "Sociology is that variety of study of the common subject-matter of social science which trains attention primarily upon the forms and processes of groups."¹ A little more amplified statement of the same thought is contained in the following definition:

The sociological technique is that variant among the social science techniques which proceeds from the perception that, after allowing for their purely physical relations, all human phenomena are functions not only of persons, but of persons whose personality on the one hand expresses itself in part through the formation of groups, and on the other hand, is in part produced through the influence of groups. In brief, sociology is that technique which approaches the knowledge of human experience as a whole through investigation of group-aspects of the phenomena.²

The sociological technique is that variant among the social science techniques which proceeds from the perception that all human phenomena are functions of groups.³

These citations are sufficient to show that in Small's view, the group is the fundamental concept in constructing a sociology. The analysis of group relations is the distinct contribution of sociology. This seems to be the only reason for its claim to rank as one among several techniques which seek to arrive at knowledge of the social process. It is the one thing which justifies sociology and puts it on a par with other social sciences or techniques.⁴ In other words, it is the group approach to the common field of the various social techniques, the social process, which constitutes the reason for

¹ "Fifty Years of Sociology in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology*, XXI, 825.

² *Encyclopaedia Americana*, article on "Sociology," 1919.

³ Lecture notes.

⁴ *Ibid.*

sociology as a method of investigation and thought. In so far as any social science can be said to have a field, the group is the methodological preserve of the sociologist. The aspects of experience which come within the range of the sociological way of thinking are "all incidents of this universal group destiny." The sociologist, as such, is concerned only with relations of men in groups and the results of such relationships.¹ His center of attention is the group. The importance of the group has not been adequately kept in view in the social sciences in general, but both in academic circles and in popular opinion there is an increasing recognition of the group.²

This emphasis upon the group concept, as the key to the claims of the sociologist for standing among the social sciences, is one of the important contributions to fundamental sociological conceptions. It will be noted, of course, that Small's point of view involves a departure from the extravagant notions of Ward, Giddings, and Small himself, with most of the other sociologists of two decades ago, when the claim of sociology as the master among the social sciences was more prevalent than it is today. Small does not leave his repudiation of the "master science" claim to be inferred only; he expressly confesses that the older conception among sociologists is no longer adequate:

Before we fully find ourselves in the ranks of social science, we shall have to make very clear, first to ourselves and then to others, that we have a clue to a particular quest, and we shall, meanwhile, have called in our juvenile pretension to be the masters of everything while we are giving proof that we can discover something. We used to compare the relation of general sociology to the whole range of human activities with the relation of general biology to all the phenomena of organic life. Most of the sociologists at one time made assertions to that effect without a suspicion that they were comical. In fact, neither term of the comparison was conceived in accordance with reality. Biologists today do not recognize a science of general biology, except in the sense of co-operation of many divisions of labor in a field designated generally as biology. No more is there such a possibility as general sociology which is not a division of labor upon a reality common to all the social sciences.³

¹ Lecture notes.

² *Ibid.*

³ "Fifty Years of Sociology in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology*, XXI, 849.

We have here expressed the point of view which is elaborated at great length in Small's *Meaning of Social Science*. We shall not pursue farther the conception of the division of labor among the social sciences and its implications for social science in general. It is brought in here for the purpose of showing that, in Small's opinion, the older conception of the place of sociology is no longer tenable. In place of that conception he places his methodological plan of the co-ordinated techniques at work upon a common object, the social process. Among these various methodological variants the sociological takes its place by virtue of its particular methodological tool, the group concept. This concept, then, in such an arrangement, is of the most fundamental and vital importance in the whole of that part of the division of labor called sociology. With this introductory survey in mind, we may proceed to some more particular parts of his treatment, showing the use made of the group concept.

Mention has been made of the term "social process." A study of Small's use of this concept confirms what was said in the beginning, that the group approach is not a recent or sudden turn in his thinking. His increasing emphasis and clarity of expression of the group conception are but the normal growth of a thought which was prevalent in his thinking from the beginning. The very conception of a social process which has played so large a part in his thought and which, as explained by him and elaborated by his followers, forms a contribution to sociology, is an implication of a group conception of social reality. What he has done in later years is to make more clear the implications and logical results of his earlier central conception. In this respect he has typified, as well as influenced, the general trend in sociological thought. By the process conception he means the opposite of Spencer's static conception of groups and group relations. The process conception emphasizes a ceaseless interaction in which there is constant change of the group from moment to moment, leaving it different from time to time. A process is a "collection of occurrences each of which has a meaning for every other, the whole of which constitutes some sort of becoming."¹ The social-process view emphasizes

¹ Lecture notes.

the ongoing, changing, moving character of groups. It is a dynamic view of group relations. It emphasizes the essentially group nature of life as an ongoing stream. It is this suggested and implied conception of the solidarity of group life that is so important in all of the more modern developments of social science.

Small's use of the social-process category, connoting as it does the solidarity of the ongoing human stream as one of the fundamental approaches to the understanding of social life, suggests Comte's method which he called the *vue d'ensemble* as contrasted with the atomizing and dissecting method. The essence of Comte's method, like Small's, consists in the habit of looking at things not in their isolation but in their "together" both in space and time. Merz has characterized this method of thought as one of the most significant achievements of the last half of the nineteenth century. He has given to it the name synoptic method or view, in contrast with the process of analysis and synthesis, "the former taking in at a glance the totality of a complex subject, the latter dissecting the same into its parts and then attempting to bring them together again to a united whole."¹ The tendency to look at the problem of social life as a whole, as a plexus of group relations, is so central in Small's thought that it may be well worth while to cite Merz again as he applies the synoptic view to the problem of society:

Formerly all the sciences which have to do with this subject started from the study of the individual organism or the individual mind, frequently disregarding altogether the environment or collective life of man, or reaching this only by slow and uncertain steps. Latterly, however, not only has the collective life of man attracted more attention than the individual it has become rather the fashion to place society in some form or other in the foreground, to start with some definition of the social "Together," of the collective life of human beings, and to approach in this way not only the study of humanity or mankind at large, but also, through it, to get a better understanding of the nature and life of the individual mind itself.²

Small's thinking, from the beginning, displays this tendency, but it has become more explicit and detailed with his maturer thought. In substantiation of the statement that the group view has been

¹ Merz, *History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, IV, 431.

² *Ibid.*, p. 436.

central from the beginning of his writings, one might point to the use of the organic concept which flourished in the earlier development of thought in sociology in this country. Small has repudiated the organic theory in its extravagant forms, but he insists that it never, in the minds of those who made use of it, was more than a tool of interpretation with considerable limitation. It did have this much that was sound, the conception of the interrelatedness and unity of the human stream. The kernel of truth in it was the thought which is illustrated in Merz's statement and which is more adequately expressed in the social-process concept. The starting-point for the view which led to the biological analogy was the sociological axiom: "All men are functions of each other." Stripped of the fantastic verbiage and details of some of its sponsors, or imputed to it by its critics, the biological analogy or organic concept expressed the essential idea that "everything somehow hangs together with everything else."¹ It is this thought, which is essentially a group conception, or group approach to the social problem, which one finds running through all of Small's writings. Its significance for our purpose is quite apparent.

As a corollary of the point that has just been discussed, one may note the conception which Small has of the nature and place of social psychology in the recent development of sociological thought. Space does not permit, nor does our purpose warrant us in attempting even, to summarize his social psychology. What is important here is to point out that Small recognizes in social psychology an attempt to give an adequate basis, in the analysis of group psychology, for the final explanation of the social process. He looks for the solution in both a functional and behavioristic social psychology.² By the general term "social psychology" he refers to the fact that, since the beginning of the present century, sociologists in this country have become

increasingly attentive to the states of mind which characterize people in groups, and to the connections between these states of mind and all the activities which the respective groups perform. To express it in terms which seem most convenient to some of us, we are more and more seeing our distinctive vocation

¹ Small, *General Sociology*, pp. 74-80.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 637-49.

in trying to find out what interests are actually effective in the members of selected groups, and in what ways they shape the group fortunes.¹

With the details of his suggestions for the solution of this important work we need not concern ourselves here. What is necessary is to point out that Small recognizes the essential group problem which lies at the heart of the social process. To seek out and discover the essential process which constitutes the center of the group life is for him the task of social psychology. It is, in short, an application of the group concept to the study of life.

It will be worth while to consider some further concepts which afford an opportunity for further investigation of the use made of the group concept. First of all, it will be necessary to refer to the concept group itself, in so far as it is recognized as one of the leading sociological categories. Concerning this concept, Small says:

The fact of social groups is so obvious, and it is so significant, that the concept has been in constant use in the foregoing discussion. The term "group" serves as a convenient sociological designation for any number of people, larger or smaller, between whom such relations are discovered that they must be thought of together. The "group" is the most general and colorless term used in sociology for combinations of persons. . . . Thus a "group" for sociology is a number of persons whose relations to each other are sufficiently impressive to demand attention. The term is merely a commonplace tool. It contains no mystery. It is only a handle with which to grasp the innumerable varieties of arrangements into which people are drawn by their variations of interest. The universal condition of association may be expressed in the same commonplace way; people always live in groups, and the same persons are likely to be members of many groups.²

With this introductory definition of the term group, as he understands it, we may pass on in the discussion to the general problem of the relation of the individual to the group or of the relation between the two concepts, the group and the individual. It is here, of course, that the crucial point of view appears in all our investigations.

¹ "Fifty Years of Sociology in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology*, XXI, 817.

² *General Sociology*, p. 495.

We may begin the discussion of the problem with Small's statement of the rival theories:

Social philosophy, as hinted in the beginning of this chapter, has always vibrated between theories of individuals, regarded as independent, self-sufficient existences, and theories of society, regarded as an entity which has its existence either altogether independent of individuals, or at least by and through the submerging of individuals. Accordingly, the question has been debated from time immemorial: "Does society exist for the individual or the individual for society?" or more specifically: "Does the State exist for the individual or the individual for the State?"¹

The fallacy in this, Small points out, is the assumption of a disjunctive, exclusive relation between the two. Whether the sociologists or psychologists have had most to do with pointing out this fallacy,

the formulation of life in terms of activity has brought psychologists and sociologists to the point of view that individuals and societies are not means to each other, but phases of each other. *A society is a combining of the activities of persons. A person is a center of conscious impulses which realize themselves in full only in realizing a society.*²

With reference to the discussion of Aristotle's dictum that man is a social animal, Small observes that there is a very important sense in which the dictum is one of the primary sociological data.

Man cannot be man without acting and reacting with man. The presence of others is necessary in order that I may be myself. . . . A person . . . cannot come into physical existence except through the co-operation of parent persons; he cannot become a self-sustaining animal unless protected for several years by other persons; and he cannot find out and exercise his capabilities unless stimulated to countless forms of action by contact with other persons.³

Human life, in his view, is "always and necessarily social life; i.e., life in groups, the members of which influence each other."⁴ To speak of individuals first coming into existence and subsequently forming groups is probably a distortion of the facts; "it is probably nearer the truth to suppose that originally individuals were differentiations of groups, than to suppose that groups were synthesis

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 473-74.

² *Ibid.*, p. 476.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

of individuals."¹ "Actual persons always live and move and have their being in groups."²

Following Baldwin, Small calls attention to the fact that self-consciousness is a group product rather than an individual datum. He says:

Consciousness in itself, or at least self-consciousness, is not an individual but a social phenomenon. We do not arrive at self-consciousness except by coming into circuit with other persons, with whom we achieve awareness of ourselves. For sociological purposes this degree of refinement is unnecessary. We need to know simply that persons do not enlarge and equip and enrich and exercise their personality except by maintaining relations with other persons. Even Robinson Crusoe retained a one-sided connection with society. If, when he walked out of the surf to the shore, he had left behind him the mental habits, the language, the ideas which he had amassed in contact with other persons, not enough available means of correlating his actions would have remained to provide him with his first meal.³

Carrying this thought still farther to some of its implications, he suggests that the category "individual" is inaccurate as an expression of reality.⁴ It is not a tool of precision in the sense indicated above: that there is no separate individual as implied in the older sense of the term. The term is used uncritically in popular speech and usually carries the meaning of a separate, discrete, unrelated entity.⁵ Such a view is tending to disappear in social science.⁶ If sociology and psychology were to accept the position usually implied by the term individual in its baldest sense they would disappear.⁷ These sciences stress the group as the reality and the individual, in the older sense, appears as a fiction.⁸ This does not mean, of course, that sociology does not recognize the force of personality in social relations.⁹ A personalized factor in the social whole is a reality. Persons are real though socially created; they are more important and powerful than in the older view which

¹ *General Sociology*, p. 218.

² *Ibid.*, p. 495.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 476. It should be noted, however, that Small does not follow Baldwin in relying on imitation as the sole process of self-development. Chapter xxxix presents a very effective criticism of the imitation theory.

⁴ If *General Sociology* were to be re-written, Small would substitute "human personality" for "individual" as the title of chapter xxxii.

⁵ Lecture notes.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

made them separate entities.¹ One of the distinct contributions of modern sociology is to aid in clearing the term "individual" of the confusion with which it has been surrounded. It is because of these confusions that Small suggests the value of a substitute category for the term individual. Among the possible substitutes he suggests the term *socius*.² The advantages and significance of this term he sets forth in the following language: "The socius is that literal factor within the human whole which we now find in the place occupied by that discredited hypothesis the individual. It is the sociological conception of the term individual, freed from former misconceptions."³

Before leaving the discussion of this part of the review, it should be pointed out that Small recognizes a division of labor between the sociologist and the psychologist. That is, he accepts the individual as ready-made. The making of the individual is the field of study of the psychologist. It is the function of the psychologist and not of the sociologist to take up this more individual problem. The sociologist is primarily concerned with groups:

In any given inquiry the psychologist, as such, takes association as the known and fixed factor, in order to pursue investigation of his undetermined subject-matter—the mechanism of the individual actor. The sociologist, as such, on the contrary, takes the individual for granted, and pursues investigation of his undetermined subject-matter, viz., associations.⁴

In reply to a criticism of his view of the separation of psychology and sociology in this manner, Small acknowledges that no hard-and-fast line can be drawn but feels that, for purposes of division of labor, the primary work of accounting for the individual may be left to the psychologist, who is better fitted for the work than the sociologist.⁵ The significance of the problem here involved will appear in the next chapter. In passing, it may be observed that to take the individual for granted, as already constituted, as the starting-point for sociological study is an abstraction which has serious consequences both for social theory and social control.

¹*Ibid.*

² Following the suggestion of Baldwin and Giddings.

³ Lecture notes.

⁴ *General Sociology*, p. 447.

⁵ *Ibid.*

In other words, it would seem that there can be no valid sociology unless based on a valid social psychology, and thus far the psychologists have not as a whole presented that valid basis. One of the implications of the group concept is, as Small himself points out, the impossibility of making a valid separation of the individual from the group or vice versa.

In connection with the criticism referred to, it may be noted that Small's discussion of interests as the ultimate sociological terms of calculation presents a possible opening for attack in its failure to use fully the group concept, which forms such a large part of his thinking. We cannot hope to go into the discussion of interests in any detail. Following Ratzenhofer's suggestion, Small makes interests the basis of his *General Sociology*. Around the concept "interests" he builds up his social psychology as a basis for his sociological argument. The relation of the interests to groups is clearly set forth. The concepts "group" and "interests" form the center of his system. With the psychology of interests, and the use of the concept in social analysis, we are not concerned. What is important to point out at this place is, that the assumption of the priority of interests leaves an impression that the place of the group in the formation of interests has not been adequately stressed. In other words, the group concept has not served as well as it might. The argument implies, of course, that the group must be brought in to explain the interests, but the total impression is one of undue emphasis on the interests, rather than on the group's place in the formation of the interests. The point may be illustrated by citing the criticism made against economic theory in its treatment of the problem of value. As Cooley and Anderson and others have pointed out, the fundamental error in the theory of value has been in the assumption of certain wants as the starting-points for discussion and then building up a theory of the market and its values upon the basis of these assumed prior wants.¹ To do so leaves out the very important fact that the market creates the wants as much as it is created by them.² So in the case of interests,

¹ Cooley, *Social Process*; Anderson, *Social Value*.

² The thought is expressed in the inverted statement of an old saying, "Invention is the mother of necessity."

we cannot start with these initial assumptions and neglect the fact that the group itself creates the interests as well as it is created by them. The process is a reciprocal one and the group approach to it is as essential at least as the interest approach. Interests are group products as well as group creators. In analyzing the social process the group concept is as fundamental as interests.

Two very important illustrations of the use of the group concept remain to be pointed out, namely, the ethical problem and the application of the group concept to property relations. With reference to the first of these problems we may note, first of all, that Small places the ethical problem as the final one in a complete sociological study. For the solution of the ethical problem sociology is fundamental. There can be no valid ethical principles or ethical criteria except those furnished by a valid sociology. "Every ethical judgment with an actual content has at least tacitly presupposed a sociology. Every individual or social estimate of good and bad, of right and wrong, current today assumes a sociology. No code of morals can be adopted in the future without implying a sociology as part of its premises."¹ In place of an individualistic treatment of the problem, sociology must furnish a process conception as the basis for a valid ethical structure. This implies that both the codes and the criteria are social. They are results of social situations. "That is good, for me or for the world around me, which promotes the on-going of the social process. That is bad, for me or for the world around me, which retards the on-going of the social process."² This is the nearest we can get to an absolute system of ethics. It involves a shifting code and shifting criteria-contents, but it becomes more and more stable and refined as human experience evolves. The absolute system of ethics must give way to a functional conception; the static systems must give way to a process conception:

At all events the net result of psychological and sociological analysis for ethical purposes up to date is a certain quantum of detail in specification of this insight that the main situation is incessant movement, having no quality of rest, but consisting of a constant process, not in a straight line, but, taking

¹ *General Sociology*, p. 633.

² *Ibid.*, p. 676.

large periods of time into the field of view, consistently toward something more of the process, which to our ken is interminable.¹

On the whole, then, we may summarize Small's position by defining it as an effort to substitute a pragmatic social theory of ethics for the discarded metaphysical, individualistic systems of Kant and his followers. It is a logical application of the conception of life which has the group as its way of approach.

¹ *General Sociology*, p. 689.

[*To be continued*]